

The Purple Patch

By VALMA CLARK

PROFESSOR Henry Burt Lang sat at his wide bare desk in his home-study and frowned at the rose-shaded lamp; he preferred a green shaded student's lamp with its cold clear light. Professor Lang was annoyed: he suspected his niece, Lois, of romantic yearnings toward that romantic young ass, Max Stephens. Yearnings of any kind were offensive to Henry Lang, but romantic yearnings were unendurable. It was not like Lois; it was not fair in view of their agreement, in view of his absolute trust in her. True, Professor Lang knew Max Stephens very slightly, but he had once, in his youth, known Max's aunt, Amelie Stephens, very well—ah yes, very well indeed. He smoothed his little grey Vandyke.

Oh well—half guiltily Henry Lang drained off the small after-dinner cup of coffee; chilled milk was his usual evening beverage. Then he pushed the inkwell back two inches, clearing his desk for action. Suspiciously he inspected the sheaf of pencils to make sure that Martha had sharpened them to the finest possible points; nothing irritated him more than to pick up a pencil slightly dulled. At length he opened the drawer, took out the proof for the final chapter of his book, and settled himself to work.

He had left special word that he was not to be disturbed wherefore Lois's unwanted intrusion was inexcusable. She was a broad-faced, squarely-built,

energetic girl who usually burst into rooms—indeed, her vitality sometimes rather wore him out so that he was glad when her vacations came to an end and she went back to school. But tonight her rap at his door lacked decision, her whole manner, as she wandered over the study and finally paused before the long French window was tentative, dawdling.

"Well, well?" he snapped out impatiently at last,

"We played tennis hard—three sets. I'm rather—done up." She hesitated. "Max says his aunt, Miss Stephens, is hardly so well. She's very difficult; she won't stay in bed."

"Hm. She wouldn't!" muttered Henry Lang appreciatively.

"He says, for all her soft voice and rose brocades, his Aunt Amelie's a rare old sport. When Max was a youngster,"—Lois's smile held tenderness—"she used to play at hide and seek with him in the cemetery. She agreed with him that a cemetery was the only logical place—they used to slip away from Max's mother."

"Huh! No reverence!"

"Yet in serious moments, she talks to him like a father. When she gave him her jam factory, she said: 'Take it, my boy—there's romance in Jams. And stick by it. Thoreau, you know, when he'd learned to make pencils, didn't stop making them and go in for—papier mache snakes; he kept right on making better pencils.'"

"Amelie gives excellent advice with a twinkle in her eye," said Professor Lang dryly. "Her own life is hardly one of concentrated effort. She has started everything from bal masqués and travel to literary colonies and old lace collections, and she has finished nothing. The jam factory, I believe, was Amelie's sole venture for making money; the others were all for spending money. The way she lives," he added with unusual feeling, "is like—like sopping up rich gravy with bread—so indiscriminate."

"But she keeps step, you know; there's no age to her. Like sparkling old wine, extra dry, Max puts it. You and she, Uncle Henry,"—Lois paused, turned then and met his eyes firmly—"was there ever anything?"

"Never!" answered Professor Lang testily.

"She was a very lovely girl, they say."

"But wilful and flighty—spoiled."

"Well—I only thought there might—Don't you ever get lonesome, Uncle Henry?"

"My dear Lois, I am too busy to be lonesome; all my life I've been too busy. Tonight, as you know, I'm exceedingly—"

Lois let the window cord, with which she had been playing, snap sharply back against the pane. "Even Milton had time for three wives!"

Professor Lang sat coldly upright, with an expression that plainly said, "If you're going to get loud again and vulgar—" He coughed, glanced pointedly at the clock.

The girl's broad face turned slowly red. "I'm not sure that I can go on with it!" she burst out passionately. "I'm not sure that a vocation—knives and anaesthetics—sometimes I feel that I've

got to have warmth and color and—and love!"

He offered her no slightest encouragement.

"Won't you—let me off, Uncle Henry? I can make it up to you—somehow. There's some one special—"

"Surgery was your own choice," he replied dispassionately. "I agreed to give you the necessary training on condition that, once having started, you see it through. You are twenty-five years old; you have two more years in medical school. After that your life is your own. It has not been easy for me." Professor Lang fitted the tips of his fingers together, summing it up. "No, my dear, I regret that this thing has come up, but I've no intention of letting you off. You're a sensible person—a woman of course, but even a woman can conquer herself. You're hysterical now. If you'd like to get away, a holiday at the seashore—Kennebunk, say, or Cape Cod—I think I can manage. And now, if you please—"

"Thank you," she said formally, moving toward the door. "I—I—"

"I shall be grateful," he added, "if you will see that there are no further interruptions."

"Sometimes"—she spoke slowly—"I think you are like stone—hard grey stone, perfectly polished—"

Professor Lang shrugged impatiently, rose to close the door after her. He could no more have failed to put the period of a closed door on one room before he entered another than he could have neglected to brush his teeth after meals.

He had been right in his surmise of course—he was usually right. There had been the little incident of Keata:

Professor Lang had not known that Lois indulged in Keats, but that very afternoon, in the living room, he had picked up a marked copy of that syrup effusion. *The Eve of Saint Agnes*, which Lois had left open on the table. From the pocket of his trim velvet jacket, he drew out the little limp leather volume and permitted himself to fling it contemptuously upon his desk. Of the poets, Milton, Pope and Gray were his favorites. Keats was his abomination.

But he'd hold her to her promise; Henry Lang wasn't a man to step aside and see his own brother's daughter make a mess of her life. Max Stephens, was it, who was in jam? Jam, forsooth—the sticky sweetness of it! On his own table, jam was not tolerated except when Lois was home, and then only a standard breakfast marmalade.

One thing at a time done well—Surgery, eh?—Very good! People like Amélie Stephens who set out to gobble the world, ended by gobbling nothing at all. For himself now, he could honestly say he was successful; modestly aiming no higher than Ablative Absolutes, he had chewed them thoroughly and swallowed them completely; and now his book, a most thorough, competent work.

He was Professor of Latin in the little University of Dunkirk. Latin was the business of his life; he contributed occasional papers of philology to a certain learned monthly, and in the past, he had written a masterly, exhaustive thing on the Ablative Absolute. But his diversion was not Latin straight, but the Latin in English literature, and the one mad adventure of his life was a great tome entitled *Classical Influences on Minor English Poets of the Nineteenth Century*, a long, dull, scholarly work,

upon which he had squandered ten good years, and the round sum of ten thousand dollars—over half of his private fortune—payed out to a doubtful publisher. Now, after countless delays owing to the war and printing conditions, the volume was about to be published. Tonight marked the end of his labors. It was exceedingly important that the proof for this last chapter should be gone over and sent out at once. It was very upsetting. Just when he should be feeling a great glow of achievement, he was feeling merely restless.

Partially the restlessness was his own fault—he admitted that he should not have drunk the coffee—but partially it was Martha's fault. For dinner there had been maple mousse on top of creamed sweetbreads—Lois's favorite dishes—in place of the usual Friday night fish and cup-custard: certainly too rich by far! He must speak to Martha. Then, too, the whole atmosphere of the room was wrong for settled study. Deep upholstered chairs, soft hangings, pillows—he noted the luxurious details with disapproval. Professor Lank liked his chairs straight and his mattress hard. He preferred the bare, whitewashed space of his old study in the dilapidated cottage he had rented for years. This was one of Miss Stephens' houses, which they had taken furnished at a rent so ridiculously low that Lois had said they couldn't afford to pass it by. If only the cottage hadn't become too dilapidated—he regretted it.

Professor Henry Burt Lang made no heavy demands on life. His wants were few enough; peace and quiet, water drawn on the minute for his punctilious morning plunge, porridge and tea for

breakfast, a pocket flashlight always ready by his bedside in case he should want to make jottings. He liked things that offered some resistance—required stiffness in military brushes. He expected his red kidney beans on Saturday; he insisted upon the daily pressing of his suits—since there were always three suits and he alternated, there was no excuse for not having one of them always freshly creased; he liked his milk-toast in a certain plain white bowl and his tea in a certain earthen teapot. So his days moved along well-worn grooves, and his attention was not claimed by the trivial; the machinery of life was subordinated. One had only to know his little pet aversions and antipathies, and to avoid them. Salts and peppers that caked and would not work, spoiled a meal for him. Rush and hurry irritated him; to see him walking down Main street, brief-case in hand, a detached mid-Victorian gentleman in stiff derby and silken scarf, made Main street seem a little vulgar. He disliked stained glass windows, Christmas, fringe, incense, that painting, *The Pot of Basil*, and motorcycles.

Picnics he loathed, their informality and their extemporaneousness. Professor Lang had no patience with the unexpected—last minute dinner invitations, guests who dropped in. He refused to put himself at the mercy of impulsive friends; his life was logical, arranged for, and he'd thank no one to interfere with it.

As a classicist, there was nothing of the pagan love of beauty in him; he was of the Stoic school, not of the epicurean. It was not the broad flowing lines of a Winged Victory that delighted him, but rather the exactness of the language,

the careful scholarliness and finished perfection of detail in all things classic.

Professor Lang had certain pet phrases of praise for literature: "admirable restraint," "balanced," "universal," "chastening of genius;" and certain scathing phrases of criticism; "regrettable emotionalism," "'sprawling formlessness,'" "intensely personal," "sensuous." Tennyson's *In Memoriam* he objected to as a pathological study of grief, in very bad taste. His favorite dictum was, "A man does not talk largely about those things on which he feels most deeply."

In short, Professor Lang's was a little life, competently lived to the last deft fillip of a whisk broom, a life out of the world, that might have been lived, with very few changes, in any time or age. Rigid, austere, puritanical—but for his personal fastidiousness, Henry Lang was of the stuff old monks are made of. If romance had ever touched him, no one knew it.

Now he underscored a word, made a nervous note on the margin of the proof. Finally he paused to fill the bowl of his pipe carefully with the finest grade of mild, imported tobacco... Ah, that was better! He took up his pencil. But presently he was turning over the pages of the little Keats volume, murmuring passages that Lois had firmly underscored:

"Full on this casement shone the
wintry moon,
And threw warm gules on Madeline's
fair breast... .

"And still she slept an azure-lidded
sleep,
In blanched linen, smooth and laven-
der'd,

While he from forth the closet brought
a heap
Of candied apple, quince and plum, and
gourd;
With jellies smoother than the creamy
curd,
And lucent syrups, tinted with cinna-
mon—'

Purple patches! Bah!" The room was stifling, that was it. He rose, threw open the long window. A mellow, hush night. . . Indian summer warmth, fruity odors of ripened apples, fresh-turned soil and rotting leaves, a squashed-in yellow moon beyond the row of poplars. Surely this night air would not bring on his rheumatism.

They had quarreled humorously over a dirty Italian family, he remembered. Amélie was always doing impulsive things for indigent Italians; her generous income flowed through her fingers like water. For himself, he was a thoroughgoing Greek, believed in culture as an end in itself and in the rights of the privileged few, worried not about Italian laborers; tearful appeals to his sympathy left him cold, though he gave generously to certain abstract charities that appealed to his reason. Amélie's charities and her mode of life were utterly inconsistent, as he had pointed out to her. She was affecting high Spanish combs and extravagant cream lace at the time . . . He recalled a certain green velvet riding habit with flowing skirt, which she had worn . . . A daring horsewoman. Amélie had been . . .

Good heavens, what had come over him! It was the night and that thing Lois was playing off there in the music room: normally Lois played martial music with a firm touch, "for the good

of her soul," laughingly, but to-night it was something soft and driveling—moonshine and springtime with a sentimental sob in it—and her fingers were caressing the notes. That and some elusive sweetness . . . Ah, the little pot of hyacinths . . . Martha and her eternal bulbs!

He took himself firmly in hand, went back to his desk. It was perhaps lack of exercise—he was a little weary from so long sitting. He'd do forty counts with the dumb-bells to-night, he resolved. Professor Lang preferred dieting to exercise as a saving of time, but a certain increasing roundness in the region of the belt was crying aloud for stringent measures. Of late, he'd taken on a new series of exercises for the stomach—rather strenuous; he doubted their efficiency, but having started them, he would give them a thorough tryout.

A change was what he really needed. He had had no holiday for nearly ten years, had spent the long summer vacations locked in a stall in the Cambridge library, pouring over old source-books not to be found in the little library of Dunkirk. Now that the book was almost ready, he could afford a rest; a walking trip, say, or a little cycling jaunt through the Berkshires. Meantime, he really must be hurrying this proof.

But at the moment Professor Lang became aware of a disturbance and looked up, amazed and outraged, to discover a young man in chauffeur's livery standing in the open French window.

"If you'll pardon me, Sir, but the maid said—"

"I gave Martha explicit orders—"

"The maid said you were not at home,

so I took the liberty. Miss Stephens is waiting outside in her car." (Professor Lang recognized him now—a boy whom Miss Stephens had befriended, according to town talk.) "She asks you to ride with her."

"My dear young man, you will tell Miss Stephens I am very sorry—"

"I think you'd best humor her, Sir." There was something extraordinarily convincing about his quiet manner.

"Whimsy?" muttered Professor Lang. "I've important work . . . I'm not accustomed to having my peace— Well, well, well— It's irregular. Just a short turn, mind. My other coat—"

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"The hour, Amélie, and it's a heavy dew!" he expostulated.

"Curfew has rung," she assented, "but there's a moon, Henry, and how many decades is it since we rode together under a moon? Here's a robe. The Canal Road, Homer, and—let it out!"

It was the low, trained voice he remembered, a shade thinner perhaps. Odd, how lightly the years touched her. She was white-haired now, yet still slender, amazingly young; he peered at her, resting there among cushions, but the soft swathings of a veil irritatingly concealed her . . . Veiled women, Bah! . . . Arabian Nights' trumpery!

Professor Lang sat upright against seductive upholstery. He had never learned to abandon himself to the joy of riding: his own rattling little car, he regarded always with suspicion, and left, for the most part, to Lois; though certainly this smooth-purring monster was less distasteful.

"Julie was reading from the Book of Job to me. I had to get out—the cur-

tains were all crooked," she said plaintively.

"Ah!" he murmured in sympathy. Crooked curtains! . . . He could understand the annoyance of that.

"Big things, like Job, you can take on faith. It's the little things—sunlight on the breakfast table, a white rose in a silver vase—that give meaning to the big things, don't you think? I've been ill, you know."

"But ought you—?"

"Oh, nothing . . . I'll be—all right directly."

They rode on in silence that began to get on his nerves. "I saw Mrs. Barrow the other day," he offered conversationally, rather at a loss.

"Hm, a hat like a bad orange toadstool," she mused: "no taste, ever. About Max and your niece, Henry . . ."

"He's an incurable romanticist, eh?"

"I'm afraid so. He rises early for a glass of warm milk; she's remarkably pretty, the milkmaid. He prefers his strawberries, fresh from the garden with the dew on them—and the grit. He plays *Truth*. He buys impulsive, delightful gifts; pet rabbits; a sun dial. And Lois, she's an incurable classicist?"

"Huh, not incurable," he admitted grumpily. "But if you've brought me out to talk Lois and Max—"

"No, no, it doesn't matter. Ah, grapes!" she cried, leaning forward. "Wild grapes! Can't you smell them? Stop, Homer; Professor Lang is getting out. Over there, along that fence, I think."

He stumbled through a ditch and a brier patch (Damn it, he needed his flashlight for this sort of thing! She was the kind of girl who sent you off after water lilies on a geology trip. He

had seen that in time. Were you concentrating on Minor Poets of the Nineteenth Century, she would, as like as not switch you to a wild-goose chase after the Brontes or—or chiffons!)

He came back with his feet wet and his hands full, and she reached out both hands to him. "The fragrance of them!" she breathed, pushing back her veil and burying her face in them. Quite deliberately she crushed the grapes, and held them out, all dripping juice, for him to smell.

"I say," he protested aghast, "if you're not going to eat them—"

"No, I'm not—hungry." She did not apologize; she seemed not to notice that the purple juice was dripping over his trouser legs—and salt-and-pepper ones, a really good suit.

Then she flung the grapes away, dried her hands on her handkerchief, spoke thoughtfully: "You know, I've always been in love with you—as much as anyone," humorously. "If it weren't too—saccharine, I might say I've stayed faithful to you."

"But I never asked you to stay faithful to me," he muttered irritably.

"The time I played at love with you—you recall the evening?"

Professor Lang did.

"I frightened you off. If I'd only gone on playing cribbage with you, we might have been playing cribbage together to this day. Love is mostly illusion, isn't it? And illusion is—all there is in life; but that's where we differ. At any rate, you've missed a lot, Henry: for one thing, perfect little dinners with fillet of sole, roast venison, wines—"

"I'm careful about my dinners now," said Professor Lang uncomfortably.

"Oh! Mush and milk, served luke-warm?"

"You run to spices—cinnamon toast, I seem to remember," he growled. "Bad for the blood."

"Thank heaven, I've never had to worry about my blood! my circulation's always been good. It's been pretty drab, your life, Henry dear, but even the most matter-of-fact day has its purple patch or two,—at least a purplish moment toward the end of the day when the setting sun turns ploughed fields—lavender . . . Illusion too, but what of it?

"Now *I*—I've done everything. There's the aeroplane, skimming over moonlit lands by night—I've missed that. And there's still the South Sea Islands. But everything else . . . Riding on a bus down Fifth Avenue on a sharp night with the lure of softly hanging silks from shop windows, sea-green, coral . . . Gypsying to the tinkling tune of a charcoal fire . . . Gliding through darkness in a gondola. There was the summer I spent alone in the Northwoods the plashing of water against rocks like the murmuring of people's voices; pinecones burning, glowing red, dying to ash-lavender and crumpling—I missed you that summer. And all the seasons—" She was speaking rapidly, almost feverishly. "I've pictures: fall, and four wild ducks flying into a waning moon; winter, and the sharp black branches of trees against a lemon sunset; springtime, and the white lace of cherry blossoms against a grey stone church . . . Ah!"—she threw her arms wide—"I've the material for forty novels—and I'll never write one. You've the material for two grammars, and you'll write them both, painstakingly, adequately. I'd rather have—my forty

—unwritten novels—than your two blessed, pokey—old grammars. Sorry, rather—breathy." She collapsed with a little laughing gasp against her cushions.

"Amélie, you're overdoing!" As she leaned her head back, he saw her face dimly, realized, with a shock, how very frail she was. "You're always overdoing—"

"Only — spending my life. You know—?" He had to lean forward to catch the words.

"My Candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!"

Liquid outpourings of the soul!" she chuckled; "you hate them. Hush!"

They struck a bridge with a harsh clattering of boards; then the road was again flowing smoothly away beneath them. Professor Lang became aware that they were speeding!

"Faster," Amélie murmured.

They skimmed the crest of a hill, dropped down. "Good lord, the curve!" he shouted, bracing himself for the crash. But no crash came.

"Be still. Close your eyes." Amélie slid her hand into his.

"Madness! We'll pile up in a ditch," he protested weakly.

Her hand was very chill and he drew it into the warmth of his big pocket. Then, in a moment of amazing tenderness for her, he relaxed. Lights, reflected in the dark waters of the canal, blurring past them . . . Smooth warm air with little waves of dampness in the valleys . . . Odors, pleasant and unpleasant—musky, fungous odors and odors of earthy fruitfulness—blending . . . He had never seen anything more

beautiful than the mist over that swamp; by daylight, he remembered, it was a hideous bog of rotting stumps.

"The moon is more—moony toward morning," she said dreamily; "paler, rarer, more—undiluted—"

"It's good to be alive," breathed Henry Lang.

"Yes—isn't it?" It was the merest murmur.

Scenes from the past came to him like pictures; Lois in a little hat with a cockade, on her fat pony; college boys, in student volunteer uniforms, patiently drilling on the campus; young Amélie at the melodeon; an old white-haired couple coming down the street, arm in arm, at the close of a golden September day. His fingers twined themselves tightly about Amélie's.

The harsh screeching of a whistle, lurid flames cleaving the darkness, din in his ears and biting smoke in his eyes: they were rushing down the night in a maniacal race with a train, and Professor Lang's heart leapt forward in the first real thrill of his life. "Faster!" he chuckled. "There's the crossing ahead—" It was very real danger. There was a moment of keen, sharp suspense, when the train was crashing down upon them, but it did not happen. They cleared the crossing, the shrill whistle came waveringly back to them over far hills, and a clear road and peace stretched once more before them.

An old man and an old woman, arm in arm . . . Lulled to a state of vague emotionalism such as he abhorred, Henry Lang lost himself in the poetry of mere motion; almost he was feeling mildly lyrical. Hotly he realized that the abominable thing he was humming was *Silver Threads Among the Gold*.

Amélie would be smiling in the dark. "You'll be joining in on the chorus," he said, with attempted irony.

Amélie answered nothing at all. She was leaning against him slightly, her head dropping over as though she had fallen asleep; her fingers were cool. With a sudden movement, Henry Lang bent over her, put out a hand to her face. He managed an inarticulate cry to the young chauffeur.

"Is it—over, Sir? Didn't you know she was—dying? There's a house here, I think . . ."

* * *

Sometime later a rather disheveled Professor Lang stepped into his own study, scowled at the purple grape stains. He frowned at the dregs of coffee in the small cup . . . Coffee in his blood—he should not have drunk it.

It was too grotesque to be real; an hour before they had been talking about Mrs. Barrows' atrocious orange hat and —cinnamon toast—"No pain, Sir," the young chauffeur had gulped; "you just stop breathing—" "To cease upon the midnight with no pain," muttered Professor Lang. "Lord, Keats again?"

Messy, dying on his hands like that; she might have stayed decently at home in her own bed. He would finish with his nightcap on, so to speak, and his

papers sorted and filed away in good order. Yet rather splendid, that last mad, glorious adventuring into death—!

Lois paused in the doorway, which he had left open, stared at his muddy shoes. "Where have you been?" she wondered.

"Wild grapes," he murmured vaguely. Martha must send it to the cleaner's. Where have you been?"

"A little ride with—Max. Good night then, Uncle."

"Hold on!" He fidgeted with a pencil. "Understand. I don't approve; it's foolhardy—worse, rank emotionalism. You give up everything you've been striving toward for twenty-five years. Marry him if you must. But close the door—there's a draft."

It was very still in the room. . . . Nothing but the ticking of the clock, ever, to keep him company. Had she loved him then? She had laughed, but she must have known she was dying and she had come for him. Amélie Stephens . . . Amélie . . . He sat hunched over his desk dreaming, until all the world was asleep and there was only the chirping of crickets. At length he pulled himself erect, smoothed out the proof for his final chapter. He had never in his life been so tired . . . Yet with haste, he might finish before morning.